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Persuasion Through Emotion? An Experimental Test of the Emotion-Eliciting Nature of Populist Communication

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Populist parties have been extremely successful in recent years. It is often argued that their focus on emotion-eliciting appeals instead of rational arguments contributes to this success; however, there is a lack of empirical evidence to support this assumption. The objective of this article is to test whether populist appeals do indeed elicit emotions and whether this increases the persuasiveness of the appeals. An experiment was conducted (N = 580) comparing populist and nonpopulist appeals on political advertising posters. The results show that populist appeals elicit stronger emotions than nonpopulist appeals and that these emotions mediate the persuasiveness of the appeals. The widespread assumption that populist appeals are persuasive because they are inherently emotional is thus supported. This finding helps to explain the success of parties that make use of such populist messages.

Keywords: populism, persuasion, emotions, core relational themes, multimessage design

Populist actors have recently been extremely successful in Western democracies. Many scholars have attributed this success to the specific mode of communication employed by these parties (Bos, van der Brug, & de Vreese, 2011; Cranmer, 2011; Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2016; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Mazzoleni, 2008; Mazzoleni, Stewart, & Horsfield, 2003). However, it is still an open question as to why populist appeals are apparently more successful than appeals from other parties in influencing attitudes. In other words, what differentiates populist appeals from nonpopulist appeals? Does this difference make the former more persuasive?

A commonly addressed characteristic of populist communication is its emotional appeal. Several scholars refer to emotionality as an element of populist communication (Bos, van der Brug, & Vreese, 2010; Hameleers et al., 2016; Mazzoleni et al., 2003; Meyer, 2006; Plasser & Ulram, 2003). This "extra emotional ingredient" (Canovan, 1999, p. 6) is considered particularly persuasive. Do populist appeals indeed elicit stronger emotions than nonpopulist appeals? If so, do these emotions influence citizens' political attitudes?

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The aim of this study is to provide a twofold contribution to closing this research gap: First, the potential of populist appeals to elicit emotions is tested with an experiment. Following the concept of core relational themes of emotions (Lazarus, 2001), it is assumed that messages will elicit emotions when they reflect the specific situational characteristics associated with an emotion and when such characteristics are perceived to be relevant (Nabi, 1999). It is thus expected that populist appeals portraying the elite in a negative way will elicit the negative emotions anger and fear, while populist appeals demonstrating populist actors' engagement for the people will elicit the positive emotions hope and pride. The experience of both positive and negative emotions is expected to be stronger for people who agree with the populist ideology, because they attribute more relevance to the addressed core relational themes. Second, the persuasiveness of populist appeals is tested. It is expected that individuals' attitudes toward an issue will be more favorable if the issue is promoted with a populist (rather than a nonpopulist) appeal, because the populist appeal will elicit emotions, which in turn contributes to persuasion.

What Is Populist Communication?

The Populist Ideology

In recent years, a minimal definition (Kaltwasser, 2012) of populism as a thin ideology (Mudde, 2004) has gained wide acceptance. It postulates an antagonistic relationship between a homogeneous and virtuous people with a corrupt elite as well as a demand for people's sovereignty (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Mudde, 2004). In this view, populism is considered a relational concept (Priester, 2011) that gains its meaning from the relationship among the people, the elite, and a populist actor with regard to the structure of power in society (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008). Populism can be associated with more substantive ideologies, such as nationalism or socialism (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2008; Mudde, 2004), which define the relationship of the people with specific societal groups (e.g., local people vs. immigrants or common people vs. the rich). The combination of the vertical distinction toward elites and the horizontal distinction toward other groups is often referred to as thick or full populism (Aalberg, Esser, Reinemann, Stromback, & de Vreese, 2016; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007).

Populist Communication

Whereas the populist ideology is a mental concept, populist communication is manifest. It can be observed in party manifestos (Pauwels, 2011; Rooduijn et al., 2014), political speeches (Block & Negrine, 2017; Cranmer, 2011; Hawkins, 2009), and the media (T. Akkerman, 2011; Bos et al., 2011; Cranmer, 2011; Hameleers, Bos, & de Vreese, 2017; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Scholars have classified statements as populist when the statements reflect the populist ideology on a communicative level (Hawkins, Riding, & Mudde, 2012; Kriesi, 2014). Rather than reflecting the ideology as a whole, single statements mostly refer to certain aspects (Engesser, Ernst, Esser, & Büchel, 2017). Previous research has identified several such aspects (see Table 1), and they can be systemized according to the target they address: Statements can refer to the people and help construct a homogeneous in-group; or statements can refer to "the others" (the elite and out-groups), who are blamed or excluded from the people (Aalberg et al., 2016). Following Wirth et al. (2016), statements that favor the people will be referred to as *advocative* populist

communication, and statements that discredit an out-group will be referred to as *conflictive* populist communication.

Table 1. Overview of Populist Key Messages in the Literature.

Advocative messages		
Referring to a monolithic people	Stating that the people are a uniform body with no internal differences and that there is such a thing as the common will of the people	Bos et al., 2011; Cranmer, 2011; de Raadt, Hollanders, & Krouwel, 2004; Reungoat, 2010
Stressing the people's virtues and achievements	Applying a Manichean outlook and stating that the people are inherently good and their decisions always right as well as cherishing populist actors for their commitment in the name of the people	Jagers & Walgrave, 2007
Demonstrating closeness to the people	Presenting oneself as a genuine member of the people, not the elite	Block & Negrine, 2017; Cranmer, 2011
Demanding sovereignty for the people	Claiming more power for the people than for the elite, the courts, supranational institutions, or other groups	Cranmer, 2011; de Raadt et al., 2004; Pauwels, 2011; Reungoat, 2010
Conflictive messages		
Excluding others from the people	Stating in a value-neutral way that some groups do not belong to the people	Cranmer, 2011; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007
Discrediting others	Degrading the excluded groups by attributing to them bad characteristics	Cranmer, 2011; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007
Blaming the elite	Making the elite responsible for things that go wrong and for the problems the people are facing	Akkerman, 2011; Bos et al., 2011; Cranmer, 2011; de Raadt et al., 2004; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007; Pauwels, 2011; Reungoat, 2010; Rooduijn et al., 2014
Denying sovereignty to the elite	Stating that the elite has too much power and that this is wrong	Cranmer, 2011; de Raadt et al., 2004; Pauwels, 2011; Reungoat, 2010

Emotions in Populist Communication

It is a common assumption in the literature on populism (Bos et al., 2010; Hameleers et al., 2017; Mazzoleni et al., 2003; Plasser & Ulram, 2003) that populist communication has an "extra emotional ingredient" (Canovan, 1999, p. 6). The reliance on gut feelings rather than on rational facts and deliberation is seen as a key factor in the success of populist parties. Previous research on the effects of emotions in populist communication supports this assumption. Emotional effects have been studied from two perspectives. On one hand, studies have shown that populist appeals are more persuasive when they are explicitly emotional (Hameleers et al., 2016; Matthes & Marquart, 2013). On the other hand, it has been demonstrated that populist appeals may elicit emotions, such as fear of foreigners, which contribute

to persuasion (Matthes & Marquart, 2013; Schmuck & Matthes, 2017). However, it remains an open question whether these effects can be attributed to the populist nature of the appeals, because the potential to elicit emotions has not been compared with nonpopulist appeals. To investigate whether populist communication is inherently emotional and therefore more persuasive than nonpopulist communication, it must be tested whether a nonemotionalized message elicits stronger emotions when it is framed in a populist rather than nonpopulist way.

To address this research gap, this article first describes how messages in general can evoke emotional reactions. Messages can be explicitly emotional when they contain verbal or nonverbal emotional expressions (Johnstone & Scherer, 2000). Or messages can have characteristics that make them "intrinsically more likely to elicit emotional responses" (Uribe & Gunter, 2007, p. 207). In the latter case, emotions are elicited through appraisal processes (Frijda, 1988; Lazarus, 2001); emotions result as a reaction to the situation a person is experiencing. This situation might also be experienced vicariously through media depictions (Scherer, 1998).

A useful approach within the appraisal theories suggests that two preconditions must be fulfilled by a message to elicit emotions. First, emotions arise in response to the meaning structures or so-called core relational themes of a given situation (Frijda, 1988; Lazarus, 2001). Core relational themes, therefore, are the necessary characteristics that must be (subjectively) exhibited by a situation to provoke an emotional reaction. Specific situational characteristics or core relational themes elicit specific emotions. A message thus must reflect a certain core relational theme to elicit a given emotion (Nabi, 1999). Second, emotions arise in response to events that are important to an individual's concerns and that are perceived as real (Frijda, 1988). A message's recipient thus must perceive the core relational theme and attribute personal relevance to it (Nabi, 1999).

An emotion's core relational theme is characterized by cognitive dimensions such as certainty, pleasantness, attentional activity, control, anticipated effort, and responsibility (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Lazarus (2001) integrated all these dimensions into short descriptions of core relational themes that lead to certain discrete emotions. If a core relational theme is present in a message, and the recipient perceives it to be of personal relevance, then the message will induce that particular emotion.

This study is based on the assumption that populist communication is particularly predestined to delineate situations that induce discrete emotions, even without being explicitly emotional. This follows from the Manichean perspective transmitted by such communication. Populist communication refers to situations that involve a struggle between good and evil. This struggle enhances the relevance of the situations and supports identification. Furthermore, populist communication describes how an individual is affected by this struggle. These patterns correspond well with the core relational themes described by Lazarus (2001).

Conflictive populist communication describes situations in which out-groups (the elite, foreigners) threaten the well-being of the individual and frame this as an offense against the so-called pure people. Such statements reflect the core relational themes of fear and anger. Both emotions have frequently been linked to populist communication (Betz, 1993; Hameleers et al., 2016; Plasser & Ulram, 2003; Wagner,

2014). Anger or resentment (Betz, 1993) are reactions to "a demeaning offense against me or mine" (Lazarus, 2001, p. 67). Conflictive populist communication addresses this core relational theme by portraying the elite as selling out the people's principles and values and by cheating the people out of their sovereignty. An important element of populist anger appeals is the attribution of blame to the elite or out-groups, as anger is elicited when an adverse situation is caused by others (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985) and "under human control" (Lerner & Keltner, 2000, p. 479). Fear, on the other hand, is elicited as a reaction to an "uncertain, existential threat" (Lazarus, 2001, p. 67)—that is, to a situation that cannot be controlled (Smith & Ellsworth, 1985). Populist conflictive communication elicits fear by depicting the people as powerless and at the mercy of the elite, who do not protect the people from existential threats.

Advocative populist communication places the focus on the pure people's virtues and a populist actor's engagement to defend his or her interests against the out-groups. Such statements reflect the core relational themes of pride and hope. These emotions have been linked to populist communication (Curato, 2017; Marquart & Matthes, 2016). Pride is described as a reaction to the "enhancement of one's ego-identity by taking credit for a valued object or achievement, either our own or that of someone or group with whom we identify" (Lazarus 2001, p. 67). Populist communication is likely to provide such credit to construct an in-group identity or to promote a populist leader. Hope is elicited as a reaction to appraisals of importance, goal congruence, future expectation, and possibility (Chadwick, 2015). All these appraisals are reflected by populist advocative communication. Importance and goal congruence are addressed by the populist actor presenting her- or himself as an embodiment of the people. Future expectation and possibility are addressed by the promise of democratic action. Furthermore, Lazarus (2001) describes the core relational theme of hope as "fearing the worst and yearning for better, and believing a favourable outcome is possible" (p. 67). It is this contrast of bad and good that corresponds to the populist Manichean perspective and fosters the assumption that hope is more likely to be elicited by populist communication than by nonpopulist communication.

The Persuasiveness of Emotional Appeals

After describing why populist appeals may elicit emotions, I turn now to consider the possible consequences of this emotionalization. Political communication is generally more persuasive when appeals are emotional rather than rational (Aarøe, 2011; Gross, 2008). Media-induced emotions can influence political attitudes in various ways (Kühne, 2012). Within appraisal theory, the influence of emotions on attitude formation is explained by the functional role that must be played by emotions in enabling individuals to manage encountered problems or opportunities. Coping with an emotion-eliciting situation is seen as inherent in the emotional reaction (Lazarus, 2001). Individuals try to interpret a situation in a way that minimizes negative emotional load or maximizes emotional gain (Frijda, 1988). Nabi (2003) has demonstrated that individuals achieve these goals by guiding their attention to information that supports their emotional needs. In her study, angry individuals preferred retributive policies, while fearful individuals preferred protective ones. We can thus assume that the emotions elicited by populist communication will activate emotion-specific needs and that policies promoted with populist communication will be perceived as particularly persuasive when they are able to fulfill these needs.

Testing the Effects of Populist Communication

Contrasts and Conditions

To test whether populist communication is particularly adept at eliciting emotions and whether this makes it persuasive, populist appeals must be compared with nonpopulist appeals. In one sense, all appeals that do not represent a key message of populist communication (see Table 1) can be considered nonpopulist. But scholars have identified two ideological counterparts of populism: elitism and pluralism (Akkerman, Mudde, & Zaslove, 2013; Mudde, 2004). Elitism, similar to populism, sees society split into two groups; however, unlike populism, the elite are considered good and wise, while the people are considered incapable of making the right decisions. Pluralism sees society as multifaceted; it denies the Manichean worldview shared by populism and elitism, and it therefore lacks the moralistic connotation that accompanies this perspective (Mudde, 2004). Elitism can thus be considered the reverse of populism, while pluralism reflects a completely different worldview. Whereas unspecific nonpopulist communication lacks an ideological notion, pluralist communication promotes an ideology that is contrary to populism. It is thus possible to frame the same political claim with either populist or pluralist communication and to compare the effects of this framing. Because the appeal itself is constant, differences in effects can be attributed to the populist versus pluralist nature of an appeal.

To ensure that only the target message and not the context drives the effects on emotions and attitudes, political posters were used to convey the messages. Political posters are a common instrument for political communication in Europe, and their messages can be very pronounced and unbalanced, which differentiates them from journalistic content (Lessinger & Holtz-Bacha, 2010; Matthes & Marquart, 2013). They are thus a suitable medium for this study.

Another aspect that must be considered when testing the effects of populist versus nonpopulist statements on emotions and attitudes are predispositions. Individuals with a populist mind-set will be more likely than other people to respond to populist appeals. It is therefore crucial to account for populist attitudes. Populist attitudes represent the extent of agreement with the populist thin ideology (Akkerman et al., 2013; Hawkins et al., 2012; Schulz et al., 2017). Irrespective of their support for left- or right-wing political ideas, individuals with strong populist attitudes have a high level of identification with the pure people and a strong aversion to the elite. Therefore, compared to people with low populist attitudes, they might perceive core relational themes that encompass these groups as more relevant. Consequently, they will experience stronger emotions. We can thus expect that effects of populist appeals will be more powerful for people with strong populist attitudes.

Theoretical Model and Hypotheses

This section presents a framework that integrates all theoretical considerations (see Figure 1). This model of moderated mediation covers all the effects that are of interest in this study.

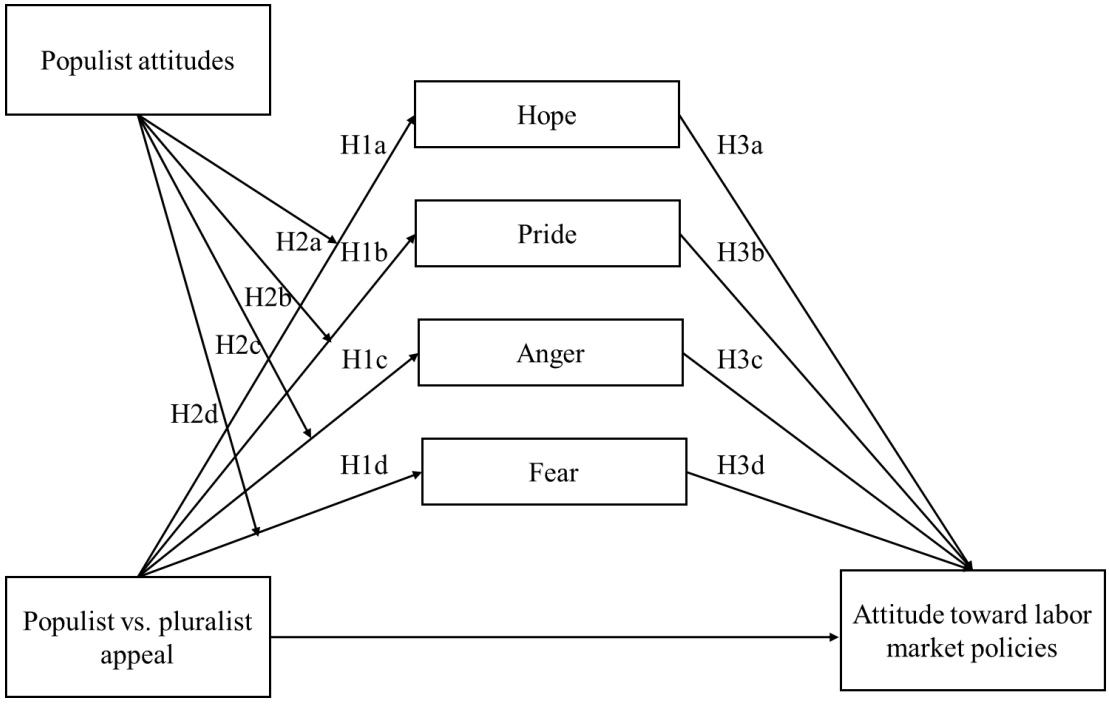

Figure 1. The influence of populist appeals on political attitudes: Moderated mediation model.

A first set of hypotheses postulates that populist communication elicits stronger emotions than nonpopulist communication. More precisely, advocative populist statements will elicit more hope (H1a) and pride (H1b) than pluralist statements, and conflictive populist statements will elicit more anger (H1c) and fear (H1d) than pluralist statements. These assumptions are based on the appraisal theories of emotions. Advocative populist messages predominantly refer to the virtues of the pure people and populist actors' engagement for their future well-being; they are therefore assumed to elicit pride and hope (Chadwick, 2015; Curato, 2017; Marquart & Matthes, 2016). Conflictive populist messages refer to the threats faced by the people and blame the elite or other out-groups for bad situations; they are therefore assumed to elicit anger and fear (Betz, 1993; Curato, 2017; Hameleers et al., 2016; Wagner, 2014). Pluralist statements are assumed to have less potential to elicit emotions because they lack the Manichean friend-or-foe perspective.

The effect of populist versus pluralist statements on emotions is assumed to be moderated by populist attitudes for all four emotions (H2a–H2d). These hypotheses draw on the notion that people with strong populist attitudes demonstrate a stronger identification with the pure people and a stronger aversion toward the elite. We can thus assume that they will perceive the core relational themes in populist statements to be more relevant and that this will lead to stronger emotions (Nabi, 1999). However, individuals who oppose a populist ideology might experience no emotion, or even contrary emotions, as they reject the moralistic construction made by populist appeals.

A next set of hypotheses postulates a positive impact of emotions on persuasion. The more hope, pride, fear, or anger individuals experience, the more they will support the promoted claims (H3a–H3d). These hypotheses are based on appraisal tendencies. To cope with an emotion-eliciting event, individuals will guide their attention to information that supports their needs and will prefer policies that are in line with their emotional state (Lerner & Keltner, 2000; Nabi, 2003). Because the policies that are promoted with populist communication present a solution for the issue they address, we can assume that individuals will support these policies more when they feel a need to reduce the negative emotions they experience or preserve the positive emotions they experience.

In summary, the model proposes an indirect persuasion effect of populist appeals. With respect to the direct effect of populist versus pluralist communication on support of the promoted claims, there is no indication to assume that, controlling for the effect of emotions, populist appeals should still be more persuasive than pluralist appeals. Rather, the persuasiveness of both appeals should be equal to secure the internal validity of the experiment.

Method

Participants

Participants (N = 580) were recruited in the German-speaking region of Europe (DACH region—or Germany, Austria, and Switzerland) by a commercial market research company.[2] They received an incentive for participation. Women accounted for 48.8% of the participants, and 51.2% were men. The participants were between 18 and 69 years old; 18.8% were between 18 and 29, 20.0% were between 30 and 39, 24.5% were between 40 and 49, 20.5% were between 50 and 59, and 16.2% were between 60 and 69. A total of 205 participants were Swiss, 194 were German, and were 181 Austrian. Although the participants were recruited in three countries, the study does not follow a comparative approach, because the DACH region is a homogeneous area with regard to language and culture (Szabo et al., 2002). Furthermore, we do not expect the psychological processes under investigation to differ among countries.

Design and Procedure

The experiment was administered online. After giving informed consent, the participants were randomly assigned to one of three treatment groups: populist advocative, populist conflictive, or pluralist appeals. To account for the variability of these appeals, a multiple message approach was chosen (as recommended by, e.g., Reeves, Yeykelis, & Cummings, 2016; Slater, Peter, & Valkenburg, 2015). Accordingly, all treatment groups were further divided into three or four subgroups, which were presented with different stimuli that nevertheless represented the same manipulation. For the two populist treatment groups, the populist key messages (see Table 1) were employed to cover the different facets of advocative

[2] The participants were recruited by Respondi, a market research company that is a member of the European Society for Opinion and Marketing Research and certified according to ISO 26362, from its online access panel using quota sampling for age and gender based on Eurostat data.

or conflictive populist communication. Similarly, three different aspects of pluralist communication were used to create the stimuli for this treatment group.

Each subgroup was presented with a set of three poster advertisements. All the posters were designed for the purpose of this study and consisted of a headline, a subline, and a small logo with the name of a fictitious political group. The fictitious group was chosen to prevent the effects of existing attitudes to affect the treatment, for example, by causing adverse emotional reactions. The group was not introduced to the participants; the image of the group was thus entirely dependent on the manipulation. Across all experimental conditions, the same claim appeared on the posters. The claim itself had to be nonpopulist, but with a clear potential to be charged in a populist way, and attitudes toward the promoted policies should not be too established. Therefore, the left-wing issue of balanced wages was chosen. Because this issue was not significantly present in the media at the time of the study, attitudes toward the politics of wages were expected to be less established than attitudes toward, for example, migration policies. The posters promoted a more balanced distribution of wages in society through an increase in minimum wages and restrictions on manager salaries. The exact wording of the claims was adjusted according to the experimental manipulation. Conflictive versions of the poster denounced greedy managers, advocative versions praised the hardworking common people, and pluralist versions stressed individual differences. The wording for each subgroup varied to represent a distinct aspect of advocative, conflictive, or pluralist communication. Furthermore, the wording on the three posters presented in one group was slightly different. The participants saw all three posters in a row to ensure a certain exposure time and to create the impression of a real campaign. Table 2 provides an overview of all treatment groups, subgroups, and examples of the messages used on the posters. Importantly, all posters were free of any explicitly emotional elements.

After seeing the posters, the participants reported their emotions and their attitude toward the promoted claim. Furthermore, the participants' perception of populist and/or pluralist communication was assessed as a treatment check. Finally, the participants were thanked for their participation and informed about the purpose of the study.

Manipulation of Independent Variables

The manipulation of the eight populist key messages was based on the content analyses that have measured populist communication in party manifestos, speeches, or the media (see Table 1). The statements on the posters were designed to match the criteria for coding the given populist message. For the three pluralist messages, statements were designed in a similar way to reflect three aspects of a pluralist worldview.

Table 2. Overview of Experimental Conditions and Manipulations.

Treatment group	Subgroup	Message (example)[a]
Advocative populist communication	Monolithic people	We are all of equal value. Fair wages for [country]!
	Virtues and achievements	Our quality has its price. Fair wages for all workers.
	Demonstrating closeness	We stand on the side of the employees. Fair wages for everyone!
	Demanding sovereignty	More sovereignty. More fairness in payment.
Conflictive populist communication	Excluding others	Those who oppose fair payment shall not profit from our performance!
	Discrediting others	Stop the criminal and excess wages of top managers. For a fair payment!
	Blaming others	Who picks up top wages creates pittances. Responsibility, please!
	Denying sovereignty	Money should not rule the world. Less power for the rich and for managers!
Pluralist communication	Importance of compromise	Reward performance, punish excess wages. Democracy needs compromise.
	Embracing diversity	There is no such thing as "the top wage." Democracy needs to respect diversity.
	Dialogue	When are wages fair? Democracy needs opinions, also yours!

[a] The participants were presented three posters with slightly varying messages. One of these three messages is displayed in this table.

Measurement of Dependent and Control Variables

Emotions. Directly after the treatment, the participants indicated which emotions they experienced while looking at the posters. A widely employed scale for the measurement of emotions during media reception is the modified differential affect scale (M-DAS; Renaud & Unz, 2006). This scale provides a three-item measurement for discrete emotions. However, the scale does not include items for hope and pride. Therefore, these items were developed according to the model provided by the M-DAS. All four emotions were measured with three items for which the participants rated how much they felt these emotions on a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*very much*). Anger (fury, rage, angry, Cronbach's α = .863), fear (anxiety, fear, frightened, Cronbach's α = .832), pride (proud, dignity, self-confident, Cronbach's α = .760), and hope (hope, confident, optimistic, Cronbach's α = .871) all showed high reliability. Despite a significant correlation between anger and fear and between pride and hope, a confirmatory factor analysis demonstrated that the structure of the data was better represented by four individual indices than by only two.[3]

[3] The correlations and results of the confirmatory factor analysis are reported in the Appendix.

Support of the promoted claims. After reporting their emotions, the participants were asked to indicate how much they agreed with certain labor market policies. These policies were formulated to match the claims promoted on the posters (e.g., "Manager salaries should be restricted," "We need a nationwide minimum wage").[4] The scale for attitudes toward labor market policies was constructed of four items, each rated on a scale from 1 (*do not agree at all*) to 5 (*totally agree*) and showed a sufficient internal consistency (Cronbach's α = .714).

Populist messages. A main objective of this study is to test whether populist communication elicits emotions. To test this hypothesis, it is essential to ensure that the participants perceived the populist message as such. Therefore, a treatment check was implemented after the measurement of the dependent variables. The participants indicated on a scale from 1 (*does not apply at all*) to 7 (*does fully apply*) which of the populist and pluralist messages (see Table 1) they had read on the posters. Each key message was represented by one item (e.g., "The text on the poster mainly stressed positive traits of the common people" to stress the virtues of the people). The indices were built by computing the mean values for all populist advocative messages (Cronbach's α = .691), populist conflictive messages (Cronbach's α = .730), and pluralist (Cronbach's α = .822) messages.

Populist attitudes and political orientation. Populist attitudes were measured with a scale by Schulz et al. (2017). The items reflect three subdimensions of the populist ideology: anti-elitism, the perceived homogeneity of the virtuous people, and a demand for people's sovereignty. All items were measured on a scale ranging from 1 (*do not agree at all*) to 5 (*totally agree*). An index was built using all 12 items of the scale, which showed good reliability (Cronbach's α = .843). Because the scale measures populism in the sense of a thin ideology, political left-right orientation was measured with an additional item ranging from 1 (*left*) to 11 (*right*). For the purpose of this analysis, the scale was recoded to obtain high values for individuals with a left-wing orientation, because they are expected to show more support for the promoted (left-wing-oriented) claims.

Results

Treatment Check: Populist and Pluralist Messages

To test the hypotheses postulated in this article, it is inevitable that the participants perceived the messages on the posters as conflictive populist, advocative populist, or pluralist, according to the treatment. A set of three analyses of variance was conducted to test for differences among the three treatment groups. The treatment groups (all subgroups united) were used as the independent variable, and the three indices for perception of populist advocative, populist conflictive, and pluralist messages were the dependent variables. The analyses revealed significant differences in the recognition of key messages, following the expected pattern: Populist advocative messages were recognized significantly more by the participants in the advocative treatment group (M = 4.693) than by the participants in the conflictive group (M = 4.347) or pluralist group, M = 4.277, $F(2, 569) = 5.677$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .020$. Conflictive populist messages were recognized significantly more by the participants in the populist

[4] The full item wording can be found in the Appendix.

conflictive treatment group (M = 5.188) than by the participants in the advocative (M = 3.678) or pluralist (M = 3.519) group, $F(2, 570) = 96.436$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .253$. Furthermore, pluralist messages were recognized significantly more in the pluralist treatment group (M = 4.810) than in the populist advocative treatment group (M = 4.175) or the conflictive treatment group, M = 3.980, $F(2, 564) = 11.220$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .038$. The absolute values indicate that the political claim of fair wages itself also relates to the key messages to a certain extent. Nevertheless, the manipulation can be considered successful due to the significant gradual differences among all groups.

A second treatment check examined the persuasiveness of the labor market claims on the posters across conditions. Although the wordings differ among conditions, the promoted policies should be equally convincing on posters with conflictive populist, advocative populist, and pluralist messages. Differences in the persuasiveness of the appeals should result from emotional responses, not from the claims themselves, because these were designed to be constant across groups. This was tested with an analysis of variance using support for the promoted claims as the dependent variable and the grouped treatment conditions as the independent variable. There was no significant difference among the treatment groups, $F(2, 577) = 1.187$, *ns*; thus, all claims were equally persuasive.

Effects of Populist Communication

The moderated mediation model was tested using PROCESS (Hayes, 2013), model 7. As depicted in Figure 2, this model assesses the conditional effect of X (populist versus pluralist appeals) on Y (support of labor market policies) through a mediator M (emotions) and in condition of a moderator W (populist attitudes). Two separate analyses were conducted to compare the impact of advocative populist messages with pluralist messages on labor market policies mediated by hope (H1–3a) and pride (H1–3b), and the impact of conflictive populist messages versus pluralist messages mediated by anger (H1–3c) and fear (H1–3d). All four mediators were included in both analyses to examine whether only the predicted mediation effects occur. Political orientation was included as a covariate, because the level of support for the promoted policies is expected to depend on left- or right-wing orientation. Furthermore, two dummy variables representing the three nations within the DACH region were included. The variables were mean-centered for products, and HC3 correction was used to obtain heteroskedasticity-consistent standard errors (Hayes & Cai, 2007). The descriptive statistics for the dependent variable, the moderator, and the mediator are listed in Table 3.

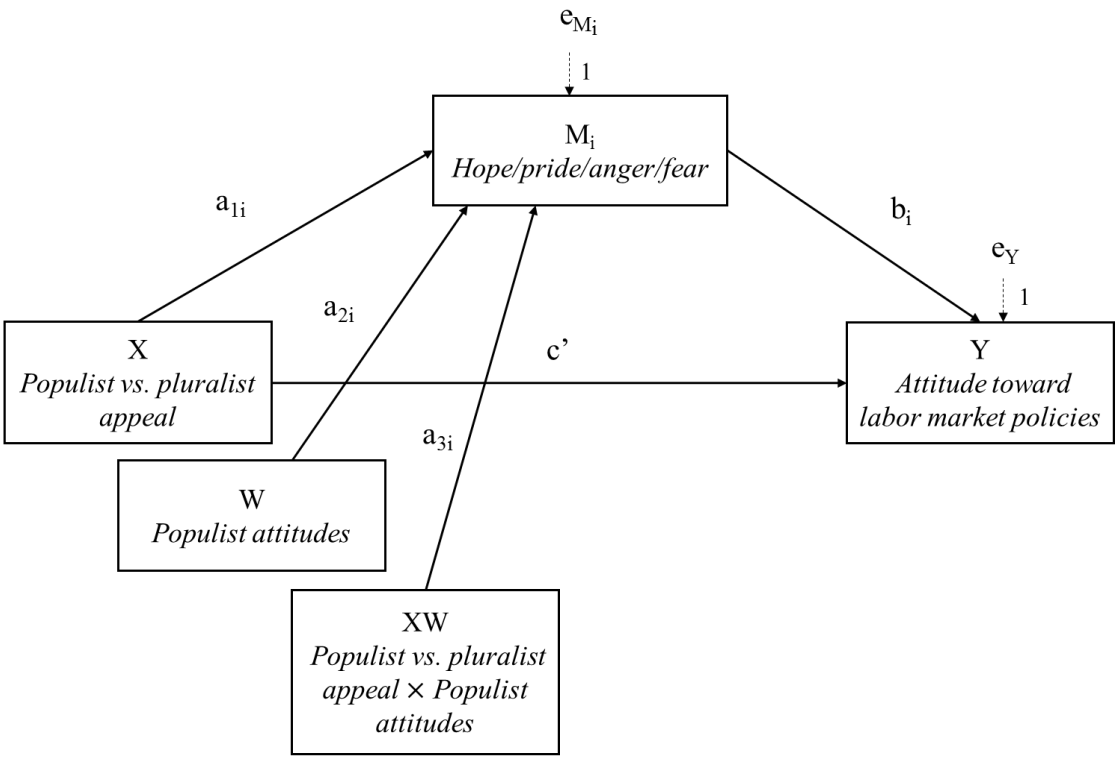

Figure 2. Statistical model of the moderated mediation (based on Hayes, 2013).

Table 3. Emotions and Attitudes Toward Labor Market Policies as a Function of Populist and Pluralist Appeals.

	Populist advocative appeal (*n* = 216)		Populist conflictive appeal (*n* = 209)		Pluralist appeal (*n* = 155)	
	M	*SD*	*M*	*SD*	*M*	*SD*
Labor market attitudes	3.53	0.78	3.63	0.65	3.61	0.71
Populist attitudes	3.60	0.70	3.59	0.64	3.65	0.72
Fear	1.92	0.94	2.08	0.97	1.75	0.85
Anger	2.27	1.02	2.88	1.19	2.08	1.03
Hope	3.11	1.02	2.47	1.15	2.73	1.12
Pride	2.82	1.02	2.33	0.99	2.49	0.98

Emotion-eliciting effects. The first analysis compares the populist advocative appeal with the pluralist appeal. The populist advocative appeal elicited significantly more hope (b = 0.394, SE = 0.113, p < .001) and pride (b = 0.341, SE = 0.105, p < .001) but not more fear or anger than the pluralist appeal. H1a and H1b are thus supported. Populist attitudes also had a positive effect on the experience of hope (b = 0.435, SE = 0.080, p < .001) and pride (b = 0.242, SE = 0.079, p < .01), however, irrespective of the treatment. Populist attitudes did not moderate the experience of positive emotions in response to the populist advocative appeal; thus, H2a and H2b must be rejected. However, political orientation had a negative effect on pride, indicating that individuals who consider themselves politically right-wing experienced more pride in response to the populist posters.

The second analysis compares the populist conflictive appeal with the pluralist appeal. As predicted, the populist conflictive appeal elicited more anger (b = −0.827, SE = 0.117, p < .001) and more fear (b = 0.337, SE = 0.098, p < .001) than the pluralist appeal. H1c and H1d are thus supported. Interestingly, the populist conflictive appeal also decreased the experience of hope compared to the pluralist appeal (b = −0.270, SE = 0.105, p < .05). Populist attitudes contributed to the experience of anger (b = 0.203, SE = 0.081, p < .05) but not to the experience of fear. Furthermore, there was a significant interaction between the treatment and populist attitudes on the experience of anger (b = 0.444, SE = 0.161, p < .01), thus supporting H2c. Although individuals with very low populist attitudes did not feel more anger in response to the populist treatment than to the pluralist treatment, there was a big difference for individuals with high populist attitudes. There was no such interaction for the experience of fear; thus, H2d must be rejected.

Overall, the data support the assumption that a message elicits stronger emotions when it is framed with populist communication than it does when it is framed with pluralist communication. Furthermore, advocative and conflictive populist appeals elicit different emotions according to the core relational themes they address; advocative appeals elicit hope and pride, while conflictive appeals elicit fear and anger.

Persuasive effects. The second part of the analysis describes the persuasive effects of the elicited emotions. In the model comparing populist advocative appeals with pluralist appeals, the experience of hope increased the support for the promoted labor market policies (b = 0.252, SE = 0.065, p < .001), while the experience of pride did not.[5] H3a is thus supported, while H3b must be rejected. There is also a negative direct effect of the treatment on support for the policies, which indicates that individuals who did not experience positive emotions were less favorable toward the claims when confronted with the populist appeal than when confronted with the pluralist appeal (b = −0.198, SE = 0.095, p < .05). Furthermore, individuals were more in favor of the policies the more they considered themselves to be politically left (b = 0.055, SE = 0.020, p < .01). Overall, there was a positive indirect effect through the mediator hope for individuals with low, medium, and high populist attitudes (see Table 4). Irrespective of individuals' populist predisposition, the populist advocative appeal elicited hope, which

[5] In a mediation model with pride as the only mediator, the experience of this emotion also has a significant and positive effect on the support of labor market policies (b = 0.133, SE = 0.043, p < .01). However, in the combined model, hope seems to be the dominant emotion.

increased support for the promoted claims. There were no significant country effects for the experience of hope or pride, nor for the support of the labor market policies.

In the model comparing populist conflictive appeals with pluralist appeals, the experience of anger increased the support for the promoted labor market policies (b = 0.142, SE = 0.043, p < .001), whereas the experience of fear did not.[6] H3c is supported; however, H3d must be rejected. Political orientation had only a marginally significant effect on support of the promoted policies; the more left-leaning individuals were, the more favorable they were toward the claims (b = 0.038, SE = 0.029, p = 0.56). The treatment did not have any direct effect on support for labor market policies. Overall, there was a positive indirect effect among individuals with low, medium, and high populist attitudes through the mediator anger but not through the mediator fear (see Table 4). The more anger individuals experienced, the more they were in favor of the promoted labor market policies. Although individuals with a populist predisposition experienced more anger in response to the populist posters, the indirect effect was also significant for individuals with low populist attitudes. There were no significant country effects for the experience of anger or fear, nor for the support of the promoted polices.

Unexpectedly, also in this model, the experience of hope had a positive effect on support for labor market policies. The more hope individuals experienced, the more supportive they were (b = 0.190, SE = 0.060, p < .01). The indirect effect through hope is significant for individuals with low and medium populist attitudes (see Table 4). Two interpretations of this effect are proposed in the discussion.

Discussion

The aim of this study is to test the widespread assumption that populist communication is particularly persuasive because of its inherent emotionality. As predicted, the presented populist appeals elicited stronger emotions than the pluralist appeals; advocative populist messages elicited pride and hope, and conflictive populist messages elicited fear and anger. Hypotheses 1a–1d were thus supported. Furthermore, there were significant indirect effects of populist appeals on attitudes through emotions. The more hope or anger individuals experienced in reaction to the populist message, the more they were persuaded by the claims on the posters. Hypotheses 3a and 3c were supported. These indirect effects were significant for all levels of populist attitudes. These findings suggest that populist advocative as well as conflictive appeals can even be persuasive for individuals who do not already support the populist ideology.

[6] In addition, in a model with a single mediator, the experience of fear did not significantly affect attitudes toward labor market policies.

Table 4. Indirect Effects of Populist Versus Pluralist Communication on Labor Market Attitudes via Emotions at Different Levels of Populist Attitudes.

Mediator	Low populist attitudes (*M* – 1 *SD*)			Medium populist attitudes (*M*)			High populist attitudes (*M* + 1 *SD*)		
	b	*SE*	BCa CI[b]	*b*	*SE*	BCa CI	*b*	*SE*	BCa CI
Advocative versus pluralist appeals									
Hope	0.068	0.043	[0.001, 0.170]	0.099	0.039	[0.040, 0.195]	0.130	0.056	[0.044, 0.266]
Pride	−0.011	0.017	[−0.063, 0.008]	−0.019	0.023	[−0.074, 0.020]	−0.027	0.034	[−0.113, 0.028]
Anger	0.015	0.019	[−0.006, 0.047]	0.013	0.014	[−0.004, 0.056]	0.011	0.017	[−0.007, 0.067]
Fear	−0.015	0.023	[−0.076, 0.022]	−0.008	0.013	[−0.045, 0.010]	−0.001	0.010	[−0.082, 0.017]
Conflictive versus pluralist appeals									
Hope	−0.062	0.037	[−0.162, −0.008]	−0.051	0.028	[−0.126, −0.010]	−0.040	0.036	[−0.132, 0.018]
Pride	0.021	0.023	[−0.008, 0.091]	0.013	0.015	[−0.005, 0.060]	0.004	0.017	[−0.018, 0.061]
Anger	0.075	0.032	[0.026, 0.154]	0.117	0.040	[0.048, 0.205]	0.160	0.056	[0.062, 0.282]
Fear	−0.023	0.020	[−0.078, 0.003]	−0.027	0.020	[−0.075, 0.004]	−0.030	0.023	[−0.089, 0.004]

[b] bias-corrected and accelerated bootstrap confidence interval

The study also revealed some unpredicted effects: The expectation that individuals with strong populist attitudes would attribute more relevance to the populist messages and therefore experience stronger emotions was only supported for anger (H2c). This finding underscores the central role that has been ascribed to anger in the context of populism in academia (Betz, 1993; Hameleers et al., 2016; Wagner, 2014) as well as among the public (e.g., the use of the term *Wutbürger*, or "enraged citizen"). Furthermore, although all emotions were elicited as predicted, persuasive effects were only found for hope and anger (H3a and 3c). Because conflictive populist appeals elicited more anger than fear, and advocative populist appeals elicited more hope than pride (see Table 3), a possible explanation is that only the most dominant emotions had a persuasive impact. Unexpectedly, hope was also a significant mediator in the model with populist conflictive appeals. This finding can be interpreted in two ways: On one hand, pluralist appeals might have elicited hope, which increased their persuasiveness more than the populist appeals did. On the other hand, populist appeals may have decreased the experience of hope. This seems plausible, because fearful or angry people may simultaneously feel hopeless in light of the situation. Nevertheless, the experience of hope had a positive impact on the support of the promoted polices. Since populist attitudes contributed to the experience of hope irrespective of the treatment, it could be that both effects are independent, and the indirect effect is only a methodological artifact. Finally, the direct effect of populist communication on attitudes to labor market policies was negative in the populist advocative

model. This finding indicates that participants who did not feel hope in response to the posters actually rejected the populist appeal. Since this was not the case for conflictive messages, a possible interpretation is that the participants did not like the wording of the advocative populist messages: Whereas "the people" is an unproblematic term in English, the German "*das Volk*" is still associated with the Nazi regime. Although we tried to use alternative terms, such as "*die Leute*," the wording of some advocative posters might have caused irritation, which then led to rejection of the message. This aspect should be considered for future research.

The present study employs a multimessage design and relies on a nonstudent sample; the participants represent a diverse population in terms of gender, age, and nationality. Fictitious actors were chosen as the senders of the messages to help prevent existing attitudes from interfering with the treatment so as not to evoke adverse emotional reactions. For the same reason, the promoted policies were left-wing. Left-wing issues seemed to be less prominent than right-wing issues (though present) in the political discourse of the countries under investigation, and, therefore, the participants were expected to be more open to persuasive influences. Nevertheless, the study has some limitations.

First, the messages in this study are only about one issue. The focus was to investigate the differential effects of different forms of populist appeals compared with nonpopulist appeals. While the messages represented a great variability of populist communication, the issue was held constant to secure the internal validity of the experiment; the selected issue could be used in all conditions, even the nonpopulist ones. It remains a question for future research whether messages promoting other issues, especially right-wing ones, elicit the same emotions or whether they also touch additional core relational themes.

Second, pluralist appeals were chosen as a contrast to populist appeals. Other possibilities could be explored to operationalize nonpopulist appeals. The treatment check revealed that even the pluralist appeals represent some populist features; most likely, this is because the issue of fair wages itself relates to some concepts of the populist ideology. Future research could attempt to find even sharper contrasts.

Third, a fictitious group was chosen as the sender of the messages to ensure that the effects were driven by the message and not by party cues. Although populist communication is not always linked to political actors and can also be disseminated by journalists or citizens (Aalberg et al., 2016), the choice of a fictitious actor is a certain concession to internal validity. Now that the emotion-eliciting effect of populist communication has been demonstrated, future research could improve on this. Furthermore, the posters in this study consisted of text only to ensure high internal validity. Although text advertisements are common in election campaigns in the German-speaking countries, the populist parties are especially known for their explicitly emotional advertisements using strong images. Further research should also consider the effects of explicit emotions in addition to those implied by the populist content of the message.

Finally, yet importantly, this study measures only immediate emotionalization and attitude change. Long-term effects of populist communication and effects on behavior (e.g., political participation)

would be important topics for further investigation, because previous research indicates that conflictive political advertising leads to more engagement than advocative advertising (Cho, 2015).

This is the first attempt to test whether populist communication is inherently more emotion-eliciting than nonpopulist communication and therefore especially persuasive, and it confirms the gut feeling of scholars who have mentioned this feature of populist communication. Despite the lack of explicit emotionalization, populist communication elicited emotions and therefore led to more persuasion. Populist communication was revealed as inherently more emotional than nonpopulist communication; the emotional power of political claims is stronger if such claims rely on populist rather than nonpopulist communication. Furthermore, the study has shown that depending on the populist appeal, both negative and positive emotions may determine the success of populist communication. This finding can help explain the current success of populist parties and populist actors all over the world.

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Appendix

Item Wordings

Attitudes Toward Labor Market Policies

Question: You will now read a couple of statements that are often mentioned regarding the [Swiss/Austrian/German] labor market situation. Please indicate how much you agree with these statements when you think of the current situation.

Items:

- Manager salaries should to be restricted to a certain maximum.
- We need a nationwide minimum wage.
- Rich people should be forced to contribute more—for example, with higher taxes.
- Managers should be held accountable for the mistakes they make.

Examples of Stimuli

Populist advocative: "More power to the common people.
We want fair wages for everyone!" (Text in logo: "People against rip-off!")

Populist conflictive: "Money shall not rule the world.
Less power for the rich and for managers." (Text in logo: "People against rip-off!")

Pluralist: "Reward performance, punish excess wages. Democracy needs compromise."
(Text in logo: "More compromise!")

Table A1. Confirmatory Factor Analysis of Dependent Variables.

	Four discrete emotions	Two affective states
Confirmatory fit index	0.955	0.853
Tucker-Lewis index	0.943	0.825
Root mean square error of approximation	0.060	0.105
Standardized root mean residual	0.053	0.079
Akaike information criterion	25,631.636	26,073.212
Bayesian information criterion	25,814.884	26,225.918

Table A2. Correlations of Dependent Variables.

	Anger	Fear	Pride	Hope
Anger	1	0.602**	−0.032	−0.146**
Fear	0.602**	1	0.148**	0.037
Pride	−0.032	0.148**	1	0.745**
Hope	−0.146**	0.037	0.745**	1
Labor market attitudes	0.074	−0.009	0.079	0.182**

** $p < .001$.